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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 GUATEMALA 002764

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: ELECTION SNAPSHOT #3: LEGACY OF NEGLECT LIVES ON IN QUICHE

REF: GUATEMALA 2728

Classified By: Political Officer Katharine Read for reason 1.5 (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Voters in Quiche, historically a bastion of the FRG, told us that their votes this time would be for any candidate other than the former General. Berger and Colom led the pack of presidential preferences. While there is little concern among the international observers or the local TSE over the potential for election day fraud, several

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expressed concern over the possibility of manipulation of voters by the FRG and violence after the poll results are known. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On October 23 and 24, PolOff and EconOff traveled to Santa Cruz del Quiche and Nebaj to gauge voter preferences and determine what issues are most important to voters in that highly rural province. Voters in the highly rural, desperately poor and predominantly indigenous province of El Quiche in 1995 and 1999 voted overwhelmingly for the FRG, and recent FRG internal documents claim that El Quiche has the highest percentage of FRG voters of any of Guatemala's departments. Emboffs met with European Union observation mission officials, the TSE delegate in Nebaj, the local coordinator for the UN verification mission (MINUGUA), and the director of the Catholic social relief office. Man-on-the-street interviews were conducted in both locales.

EU Mission Paints a Picture of Voter Manipulation

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¶3. (C) The two-person team from the EU observation mission, who have been living in the Quiche for the last month, expressed concern about potential manipulation by the FRG of the election, and the possibility of fraud. They saw the ex-PAC payments as a "vote-buying" tactic and said they observed individuals in line to receive payments that were too young to have actually participated in the ex-PAC activities. They also viewed the distribution of discounted fertilizer and machetes as an attempt by the FRG government to influence voters (Comment: A prestigious NGO, under a grant from USAID, has had mild criticism of the ex-PAC payments, but found no political favoritism in the fertilizer program. End comment).

¶4. (C) The EU team opined that low literacy rates in the Quiche make for a different type of election than in more developed, educated parts of Guatemala. For example, in Nebaj, of its 53,617 residents, only 36 percent are registered to vote. However, only 32 percent of those registered to vote are literate. This lack of formal education, as well as the overwhelming poverty which afflicts the Quiche, accounts for the voters' disinterest in national issues and their focus on local politics. The EU mission also believe that Quiche voters are more prone to believe rumors of supposed violations of privacy on election day (i.e. cameras in the voting booths), to be intimidated by threats and violence, and to accept bribes from local leaders, than voters in other parts of Guatemala might be.

Local TSE Delegate Discusses Election

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¶5. (C) In Nebaj, the TSE delegate Mynor Beteta Giron, told us that national politicians lack the vision to improve conditions in this remote town. He does not believe there will be actual fraud on election day, but expressed concern about the potential for violence, and particularly violence against his person, if the local FRG mayoral candidate does not win. He said that the candidate himself threatened Giron. The local "caudillo" is the leader of the "Comite Civico Todos Nebajenses" (COTON), Pedro Raymundo Cobo, who is running for his third re-election as mayor. He won overwhelmingly in the 1999 election. Mynor Beteta told us that the primary concerns of the local voters, who are among the most impoverished in Guatemala, are health and jobs.

MINUGUA Official Relates Atmosphere of Fear

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¶6. (C) In Nebaj, MINUGUA official Beatriz Lafuente told us the level of political tension had risen, driven particularly by local elections. Inflamed rhetoric has been coming from

different political parties in the weeks leading up to the election, and is not coming only from the FRG. Once again, the common thread was concern that GOG payments to the ex-PAC were being manipulated by the FRG. She does not anticipate fraud on election day, but said voters fear their votes will not be secret. There is concern that the losing party will dispute local elections, and there is a palpable fear of violence in the community.

¶7. (C) Lafuente attributed support for Rios Montt in the Ixil triangle to the perception that he "saved" the area from the brutality of the Lucas Garcia regime in the early 1980s. While "the General" used scorched-earth tactics in parts of the northern Quiche, he instituted the "beans for bullets" and model village programs in the Ixil triangle during his dictatorship.

Taking the Pulse of Nebaj

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¶8. (SBU) In response to Emboffs' man-on-the-street interviews in Nebaj, it was clear that voters were polarized around Rios Montt. Only 22 percent of respondents said they would vote for the General. They cited the FRG's track record in providing security and rural development as reasons to vote for Rios Montt. The 78 percent who opposed Rios Montt were less enthusiastic about their chosen candidate and appeared to largely be voting against the FRG. Berger had a slight lead among those interviewed, with 33 percent supporting him, compared to 28 percent for Colom.

¶9. (SBU) Nebaj voter preferences: 72 percent of respondents thought the electoral process would be transparent, 17 percent thought it would have much fraud, and 11 percent were not sure. Unemployment and security were tied with 28 percent of respondents citing these as the dominant concerns for the new administration. Only 17 percent of those interviewed thought the FRG had done a good job over the past 4 years, 28 percent said it had done a bad job, and 56 percent were not sure or said it was neither good nor bad, a statistic reflecting the lack of importance Nebaj voters attach to national political issues.

Colom Commands the Streets of Santa Cruz del Quiche

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¶10. (SBU) While located less than 30 miles from Nebaj geographically, the views of voters in Santa Cruz are worlds apart. Not one of the 18 people interviewed in Santa Cruz del Quiche expressed support for Rios Montt. The clear favorite in the survey was Colom, with 50 percent of the people saying he is the best choice for president. In explaining their choice for Colom, respondents pointed to his honesty and origins outside of the political oligarchy as his biggest assets. Trailing not far behind was Berger, picking up 39% of the support of respondents.

¶11. (SBU) Another glaring difference in the voting dynamic between Santa Cruz and Nebaj was the number of people who thought there would be fraud during the electoral process: 72 percent of voters in Santa Cruz think there will be fraud in the election process, while 72 percent of people in Nebaj think the elections will be transparent. Votes in both cities place similar emphasis on unemployment (39 percent) and insecurity (33 percent) as major concerns the new administration faces. Eighty-eight percent of Santa Cruz voters responded that the current administration had done a bad job, while all 18 of those surveyed said they would not reelect the FRG.

Comment

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¶12. (C) It is clear that local issues dominate towns in the Quiche and disinterest in national politics is pervasive. Fraud is not a major worry of international observers in the Quiche, but the possibility of FRG manipulation is a concern spread largely by rumors shared among this largely illiterate populace. National politicians pay little attention to this highly indigenous, remote region and most of our contacts in the Quiche believe that neglect is unlikely to change with any new administration.

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